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‘The Catholic Florist’: flowers and deviance in the mid-nineteenth century Church of England

Abstract

The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic change in the appearance of many ecclesiastical interiors due to the growing popularity of Catholic revivalism in the Church of England. One aspect of this process was the increasing abundance of flowers in churches in defiance of opinions which regarded such practices as incompatible with Protestantism. Such opposition also drew strength from cultural associations between flowers and dangerously alluring femininity and sexuality. It was popularly feared that priests were using flowers to lure women into their clutches. The medievalising work of Pugin and the members of the Ecclesiological Society played a major role in the moral legitimisation of both flowers and floral motifs in the decoration of churches. At the same time, rising living standards were bringing cut-flowers, including those forced in hot houses, within the budgets of middle-class households. The enhanced respectability of flowers as suitable for sacred contexts fuelled the development of an emergent craze for floral decoration in the home. Practices of the use of flowers as ornaments increasingly crossed back and forth between domestic and ecclesiastical contexts. The continued association of blossoms with the realm of the feminine did not, however, lead to sustained moral panic because flower-arranging Anglo-Catholic priests were increasingly seen as effeminate rather than as sexual predators. This analysis of developments in the early to mid-Victorian

periods is seen as forming the basis for further work into the subsequent floral interconnections between sacred contexts, aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Keywords

Anglicanism, Anglo-Catholicism, Christianity, Consumerism, Flowers, Sexuality, Victorian.

‘The Catholic Florist’: flowers and deviance in the mid-nineteenth century Church of England¹

The visual and material culture of Anglican Church interiors saw dramatic changes during the nineteenth century, regardless of the architectural style of the building. By the end of the century ecclesiastical interiors had become more richly decorated. This was the legacy of the success of the rise of the Anglo-Catholic movement of liturgical ritualism and it provided the atmosphere of sacred clutter that Philip Larkin memorialised in his poem ‘Church Going’ (1955):

Another church: matting, seats and stone,
And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end.²

This characteristic material assemblage appears in a range of other sources, such as one critic’s response to John Betjeman’s religiosity that it was less about theology than ‘a sacred *caritas* revealed in hallowed places and buildings, consecrated customs and rituals, dedicated music making, flower arranging...’³ It is widely acknowledged in popular guides, such as Mark Child’s *Discovering Church Architecture* (2008), that many people seek out these buildings due to their comfortingly familiar material culture: ‘you may be just a

habitual church visitor, a special features admirer, or just in out of the rain. Perhaps you like to sit in the peace and quiet, or smell the mixture of flowers, mustiness and metal polish'.⁴

The buildings of the Church of England have long been powerfully implicated in constructions of national identity. To give a recent example, the art historian protagonist of Justin Cartwright's recent prize-winning novel *The Promise of Happiness* (2005) recognizes that for many people the 'church has very little to do with God... it's more a shrine to Englishness: flowers, history, familiar - if meaningless - hymns'.⁵ Englishness, at some level, is thus dependent upon churches, but also churches with a particular appearance. The power of the nostalgic cliché requires there to be a 'sprawling of flowers'. The subject of this article is mid-nineteenth century England. This period saw the arrival and development of the use of flowers in Anglican church interiors. I will be exploring the reasons for the appearance of practices of floral innovation and the reasons why these were opposed. In particular, I will be highlighting the cultural role of blooms as markers of desire and the way in which their association of priests was initially seen to be threatening for sexual as well as doctrinal reasons.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century flowers were rare in Anglican churches. Plants were typically used for symbolic rather than ornamental purposes, as when foliage was tied onto pews on Palm Sunday. Jack Goody, in his wide ranging survey, *The Culture of Flowers*, has analysed the background to this situation. Flowers had been used in aspects of pagan worship in the ancient world and, as such, were a subject for controversy in the writings of the Church fathers. Popular enthusiasm, however, led to the widespread use of flowers and floral imagery in medieval churches.⁶ Much of this was swept away at the Reformation as part of the Protestant iconoclastic rejection of large elements of late

medieval visual and material practices of devotion. What Goody refers to as the 'persistence of puritanism' ensured that the use of cut flowers, particularly those imported or cultivated in hot houses, was the subject of moral concern well into the nineteenth century.⁷ Hard-line Protestant opinion regarded flowers as opulent reproductive bodies and, as such, their opulent display was seen as quite unsuitable for church and chapel interiors.⁸

From eighteenth century, however, the emergence of sentimentality, sensibility and romanticism led to a culture which increasingly looked to find moral goodness in nature.⁹ Nostalgia for pre-industrial England fed into to the rise of enthusiasm for plants and gardening.¹⁰ The use of flowers in churches was, however, impeded by their continued association with Roman Catholicism. It was only with the rise of the Oxford (Tractarian) Movement in the 1830s that renewed Catholicity of practice within a part of the Church of England led to the increasing reintroduction of blooms to ecclesiastical interiors. Thus, the seemingly innocuous topic of flower-arrangements was seized upon as emblematic of important doctrinal changes as, for instance, when Frederick Oakley (1802-80) published *The Catholic Florist* (1851), which he dedicated to the newly installed Cardinal of Westminster, Nicholas Wiseman.¹¹

Oakley's career is powerfully evocative of the dramatic changes that were taking place in the world of early Victorian religion. He graduated from Oxford in 1824, was elected a Fellow of Balliol, and joined the Tractarians. In 1839 he became incumbent of the Margaret Chapel, in London. After considerable heart-searching, he retired in 1845 to John Henry Newman's community at Littlemore, and a few weeks later followed him into the Catholic Church. Much of the opposition to Oakley from within his original denomination (and this was typical of others in a similar position) was focussed on the changes that he

made to the furnishing and decoration of his chapel. He stripped out the three-decker pulpit, established an altar with cross and candlesticks, and began the practice of the abundant decoration with flowers and greenery at Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun.¹² All of this brought him to the notice of his bishop, Charles James Blomfield (1786-1857), who had inveighed at length in his diocesan charge of 1842 against such 'Catholicising' innovations.¹³ Blomfield strongly disapproved of flowers being used for symbolic purposes and Oakeley was specifically ordered not to indulge in such practices as the placing of red flowers on the altar on martyrs' days since this implied the idolatrous worship of the saints.¹⁴ Oakeley, by then safely ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, referred in *The Catholic Florist*, regretfully, to the way in which Blomfield had 'inhibited' him from 'attempting to interest his congregation through the medium of "flowers on the altar", in the varying succession of the Christian festivals'.¹⁵

Modern commentators have tended to be a little puzzled by the seriousness with which Blomfield and Oakeley took this subject. For instance, his recent biographer Peter Galloway found *The Catholic Florist* a 'charmingly eccentric' work with a 'naive title', and he thought that 'it would be easy to dismiss the book as a collection of exotic trivia, were it not for the fact that it is so thoroughly researched'.¹⁶ However, the controversial aspects of the use of flowers in churches we so well known that all shades of Christian opinion in the early and mid-Victorian periods believed that the use of flowers in church required regulation. Even Oakeley took care in his preface to the *The Catholic Florist* to argue that flowers were 'the fairest and most unblemished among the remnants of paradise' and that they are 'instinct with no mischief; and needing no exorcism'. They should, therefore, be 'rescued from a sensual or a secular perversion'.¹⁷ In other words, flowers were good because they

were God's natural creations and, as such, they should cease to be evocative only of domestic concerns and take their place in church. His book is, therefore, not just a piece of advocacy but a guide to proper usage written in order to counter the hard-line Protestant opinion that flowers were exemplary of the dangerous allure of the fallen world, a view which could be traced back to sixteenth-century drives against idolatry.

From such points of view an enthusiasm for flowers implied a sinful fascination with worldly sensuality such as was, supposedly, characteristic of Roman Catholics. Bunches of cut flowers, in particular, were understood as aspects of female material culture. When bought by men they were assumed to be gifts for women and thus, potentially, aids to seduction. It is important to be aware how strongly gendered flowers were in Victorian England. For instance, in the popular *Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (c. 1860), in 'Warner's Bouquet Series', each sort of flower has a meaning – including the one we remember today, red rose for love. Tuberose, for instance, equated to dangerous pleasures, whilst 'white rose (dried)' was 'death preferable to loss of innocence'. This symbolism was all very feminine, for there was no flower that meant 'handsome', but there were many referring to different forms of 'beauty', such as 'always new', capricious, delicate, divine, glorious, lasting, magnificent, mental, modest, neglected, pensive, rustic, unconscious and 'is your only attraction' (!).¹⁸

The Anglo-Catholic heirs of the Tractarian pioneers brought flowers into churches in imitation of medieval practice as part of their campaign to roll back what they saw as the undesirable aspects of the Protestant Reformation. When they did so, however, they raised a key fear that they were, in fact, corrupt men who were involving themselves in women's concerns in order to seduce the wives and daughters of their male parishioners. Similar

worries were addressed toward the rise of Anglican sisterhoods and monastic orders. But it is important to be aware that what was overwhelmingly taking place was that catholicising clergy were becoming the subjects of paranoid sexual fantasies. In particular, there was a widespread Protestant fetishisation of the bodies of holy Catholics in which their performances of celibacy was rumoured to lead to the development of excessive sexual desires in the absence of the release provided within marriage.¹⁹ For instance, in Charles Allston Collins (1828-73), *Convent Thoughts* (1851), sexual frustration in the context of abundance is expressed by the figure of a female novice standing amidst the flowers of a lush garden. Collins painted *Convent Thoughts* in the company of John Everett Millais at the home of the Tractarian head of the Clarendon Press in Oxford, Thomas Combe (fig. 1). This painting was sometimes read at the time as a pro-Catholic statement in which the flowers appeared as emblems of truth and beauty in nature. However, it is known that Collins' attitudes to sisterhoods were 'at best ambivalent'.²⁰ Most critics today tend to regard this painting as exhibiting a strong sense of anxiety at the impending sacrifice of her reproductive destiny by this seemingly miserable novice.²¹ At her feet, in fact all around her since she stands on a miniature island reached by a flimsy plank, is a pond that seethes with plant and animal life. In 1845 Collins had almost drowned; Millais wrote of his friend that, as a result, 'one could not induce him to commit his body (for fear of drowning) within a coffin bath of hot water'.²² This painting may thus invoke terror at the thought of drowning in the womb of nature. The flowery garden is thus an alluring trap for the novice, and for the viewer.²³ Millais' *Ophelia* (1851-2), is also a painting that is focussed on dangerous seduction. Ophelia, half-in and half-out of the water, mouth open, implicated in floral nature, is painted as a sensuous object of allure, as a siren, as well as a victim.²⁴ In so doing

Millais refigures her from being a representation of virtue, as she had often been in previous artistic representations, to being expressive of 'transgression, perversity and decadence'.²⁵

Bearing in mind that Ophelia has been interpreted as representing, amongst many other things, nostalgia for lost Catholicism, her flowery body represents, like that of Collins' novice and like the interiors of the first Anglo-Catholic churches, a focus of dangerous and perverse erotic desire.²⁶

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the revival of what were presented as medieval and Catholic forms of elaborate worship and church decoration in the Church of England led to a spate of legal cases as innovations were measured against what was regarded as traditional reformed practice. An important early case took place in 1847 when Henry Phillpotts, the bishop of Exeter, decided that William Parks Smith had acted illegally when he placed two vases of flowers and a cross draped with flowers on the communion table of St. John's Chapel, Torquay at Eucharist on Easter Sunday.²⁷ Conservative comment in the following years suggested that flower use should be avoided on the altar, and might be permitted in the body of the church only if this was a long-standing local custom (as it appeared to be in some rural areas). Open sanction was only given to limited and traditional use of evergreens in the body of the Church at festivals.

The most important legal case from this period on Anglican ritual and decorative innovation was fought out between Robert Lidell (1808-88), vicar of St. Paul's, Knightsbridge and Charles Westerton, one the churchwardens, and their respective supporters. Westerton warned Blomfield, the bishop of London, in 1853 that 'at certain seasons veils of richly embroidered lace and bouquets of flowers, the choicest that can be procured, are crowded in profusion on or about it [the altar]: every niche of the reredos on

each side and above, is occupied with plants of the Camilla Japonica and “Fleurs Immortelles”, and evergreens deck the main body of the church itself’.²⁸ Liddell, in his letter to the bishop in 1854, quoted Westerton as having referred to ‘bouquets of flowers and other foreign frippery’, but emphasized that they were not paid for out of the offertory. The vicar denied that flowers were ever placed on the communion table, or were used as ritual adjuncts to the mass, but were mere adornments to the body of the church and its furniture.²⁹ The bishop inspected the flowers with Liddell and Westerton and, according to the *Christian Times*, said he was satisfied with them, although he emphasized that flowers should not be arranged in cross shapes and should be in bunches of one colour.³⁰ The legal judgement handed down in 1857 created the somewhat ambiguous distinction between liturgical ornaments and mere decorations, but its essence was that disputed elements such as flowers and crosses were allowable only if they were not made part of liturgical ritual. Thus, flowers were allowable so long as careful rules of discipline were observed.

The visual results of this compromise are illustrated in the frontispiece of the first edition by John Purchas (1823-72) of one of the key handbooks of Anglo-Catholic ritual, the *Directorium Anglicanum* (1858) (fig. 2). Restrained, formal and symmetrical arrangement of flowers was crucial: they should be placed not on the altar itself, but on retables, shelves or other support structures. Any ‘unnatural’ twisting of flowers into festoons should be avoided if possible and care should be taken against the presence of decaying flowers. ‘When arranged as here prescribed’, Purchas comments, ‘and within the limits suggested, [these will] yield to the accessories of no other rite in their severe dignity and beauty’.³¹ He was thus able, by these strictures, to present a ‘manly’ and disciplined use of flowers which did not imply ongoing spiritual or gender transgression. However, his careful regulations

were soon under pressure as the result of a rise in the popular enthusiasm for floral decorations, not just in Anglican, but in other Protestant churches, and not just in England, but also in North America.³² Purchas, himself, appears to have been swept along by this rising tide of horticultural enthusiasm and, for his pains, was hauled up before the church courts having been accused, amongst many other things, of having 'profusely decorated' the altar of St. James' Chapel, Brighton where he was perpetual curate. However, Sir Robert Philimore, in the Court of Arches, February 1870, reconciled the law of the Church with what was becoming common practice. He argued that *Re Parks Smith* (1847) had been superceded by *Lidell v. Westerton* (1857) which established the legality of decoration. In his view flowers were incidental to worship and were 'an innocent and not unseemly decoration, in the same category with the branches of holly at Christmas, and the willow blooms on Palm Sunday, with which our churches have very generally been adorned'.³³ This decision, and others like it, effectively legalised the increasing use of flowers in church as being in the spirit, if not on the scale, of the modest practices of occasional adornment seen before the Anglo-Catholic revival of the mid-nineteenth century.

Architectural Botany

A key factor in the establishment of the respectability of the use of flowers and greenery in Anglican churches was the championing of vegetal decoration by many of the leading architects of the gothic revival as being in accordance with the supposed manly structural integrity of pointed architecture. The revival had taken a dramatic new turn from the 1830s

onwards as A. W. N. Pugin (1812-52) on the one hand, and the Anglicans of the Camden (Ecclesiological) Society on other, strove to develop spiritually correct forms of Church building and furnishing. Nature was looked to as a source of untainted forms which were, at the same time, decorative. For example, in 1849 Pugin published *Floriated Ornament* in which he comments on a visit to François André Dürlet who was then leading the restoration of the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp:

I was exceedingly struck by the beauty of a capital cast in plaster, hanging amongst a variety of models, which appeared to be a fine work of the thirteenth century. On asking if he would allow me to have a squeeze from it, he readily assented, but at the same time informed me, to my great surprise, that the foliage of which it was composed had been gathered from his garden... During the same journey I picked up a leaf of dried thistle from a foreign ship unloading in Havre, and I have never seen a more beautiful specimen of what we should usually term Gothic foliage: the extremities of the leaves turned over so as to produce the alternate interior and exterior fibres, exactly as they are worked in carved panels of the fifteenth century, or depicted in illuminated borders.

Pugin argued that the difference between 'antient' [ie. medieval] and modern artists was that the former used plant decoration as if real plants were laid on the architecture to '*fill up* the space they were intended to enrich', whereas the latter used decoration to create illusionistic effects: 'a modern painter would endeavour [sic] to give a fictitious idea of relief, as if *bunches* of flowers were laid on, and, by dint of shadow and foreshortening, an

appearance of cavity or projection would be produced on a feature which architectural consistency would require to be treated as a plane'.³⁴

Pugin's ideas, as is well known, were extremely influential. For instance, the architect William Pettit Griffith was inspired by the passage I have just quoted to publish his own thoughts on 'architectural botany'. Correctly applied vegetal ornamentation would, in his view, provide symbolic support for, rather than illusionistic distraction from, the structural integrity of a gothic revival church.³⁵ There was ample evidence of medieval traditions of carved ornament featuring leaves, flowers and fruit, and an increasing awareness that this would, originally, have been brightly painted. Therefore, the legitimisation of 'architectural botany' played its part in the rise of polychrome interiors in which the presence of the vegetal forms provided a justification for the application of colour.³⁶

In 1846, Henry Lascelles Jenner (1820-98), who was at that time newly installed as Curate of St. Columb Major in Cornwall, contributed to *The Ecclesiologist* on the subject of colour. He asserted that 'the same tone of mind which would lead to the loathing [of] white or grey walls in churches, "Anglican simplicity", and the like, would lead us to the overthrow of a vast quantity of Puritanism that hangs about us, in our observances on Sundays, in our usual ritual... "Quiet colours" were never thought of by our ancestors for anything, except (with manifest propriety), for the every-day habit of ecclesiastical personages. A grey Protestantism of hue still however opposes us'. He continues: 'we cannot, like Justinian, rear a hundred columns of Laconian marble, green as the first leaves of Spring; of Carian, with its oblique veins of white and red; of Carystian, pale itself, but intersected with with fibres of iron... But we have flowers which the gardens of the Augustus could probably not have

matched'.³⁷ Thus, part of the very point of brightly coloured flowers would be to create the effect of polychrome marbles.

The legal judgement in *Liddell v. Westerton* (1857) was considerably less damning than it might have been because it was argued that the disputed flowers were 'made to harmonise with the architectural outlines of the church, instead of being placed here and there in bunches' and so were architectural ornaments and, as such, could not be ritual adjuncts of the service.³⁸ The legitimisation provided by medieval carved or painted decoration helped to pave the way for widespread acceptance of the application of fresh flowers and greenery to the body of the church. This can be seen by looking at Edward Lewes Cutts' (1824–1901) *An Essay on the Christmas Decoration of Churches* (1859) (fig. 3).³⁹ Cutts was at this time a curate in Essex and honorary secretary of his county's Architectural Society. In this work, Cutts advocates the 'Architectural school' of vegetal adornment over what he terms the 'Naturalistic school' of sextons and pew openers who tie branches around the end of pews with no thought to symbolic propriety. He advocates imitation of 'the way in which the Gothic architects themselves applied to the permanent decoration of their buildings, foliage and flowers, carved in stone and often painted to imitate natural flowers and leaves from which they were copied, in evidence of the practice which they would adopt when required to decorate the Church further with living leaves and flowers for a festival'.⁴⁰ Thus, he argues that temporary greenery and flowers would have been applied in the Middle Ages to enhance the effect of the permanent decorative scheme. The use of living flowers in churches was, therefore, validated by the re-estimation of high medieval traditions of carving.

Domestic(ated) Altars

Economic changes were a key element in popularising the use of floral decorations both in churches and in domestic settings. In eighteenth-century England 'out of season' cut flowers were rare and expensive luxuries. Writing in the aftermath of the Regency, John Claudius Loudon (1783-43), a leading horticulturalist and writer of his day, notes in his *The Greenhouse Companion* (first edition 1824) that 'a Green-house, which fifty years ago was a luxury not often to be met with, is now become an appendage to every villa, and to many town residences... which mankind recognise as a mark of elegant and refined enjoyment.'⁴¹ These words were aimed squarely at the upper ranks of society, however, the development of railways was soon to facilitate the transport of fresh flowers to the cities so bringing them within the purse of middle class families (including those of vicars and curates with moderate incomes). The use of plants appears to have spread rapidly in domestic contexts and the first guides to arrangement of cut-flowers in the home aimed at the middle-class housewife were published. In 1862, Miss. E. A. Maling explained her decision to go into print on this subject on the basis that 'there seem to be few, if any' books on flower arrangement. Moreover, this has 'become of late no unimportant manner... as a rather serious item of household expenditure; the *diner Russe* requiring so many flowers, and the taste for them increasing with such rapidity'.⁴² This new style of dining course by course (as is the normal usage in restaurants today) required the table to be laid in full at the start of the meal. As T. C. March, who won the first British competition for such Table Decoration in 1861, makes clear, the impression of opulence was no longer derived from the sheer quantity of food on

display, but was henceforth expressed by elaborate table decorations (notably arrangements of flowers, vegetation and fruit).⁴³

Quite quickly in the course of the mid-century, lavish cut flowers turned from being luxuries capable of arousing envy and suspicion into everyday items available from commercial hot houses the year round. In 1875, for instance, it was commented that 'the use of Floral Decorations in houses has become quite general in this country'.⁴⁴ The blooming of church interiors, therefore, can be seen as a constituent and, indeed causative, or at least contributive, element of an emergent decorative craze. Rising affluence and social competition led to a steadily rising pattern of spending on festivals in general and Christmas in particular. Thus, with legal sanction arriving in its wake, Anglican churches and homes began to fill up with crosses, candles, greenery and baubles.

It may, indeed, be constructive to think of domestic and ecclesiastical spheres of furnishing not as inherently opposed but as evolving in relation to one other, as Peter Anson advocated in his *Fashions in Church Furnishing* (2nd ed., 1965).⁴⁵ In functional terms we can think of a church as being a public space in which to sit down. The formal sitting room in which guests were received in the home was the parlour. Thad Logan, in *The Victorian Parlour*, describes how the hearth was the focus of the room and comments that 'most British households preferred for their *domestic altars* [my emphasis] an open fire set in some version of an iron or steel grate'.⁴⁶ Over the fireplace was the mantle-shelf on which, especially in higher class households, a few valuable items, often candlesticks, were symmetrically arranged much as objects were arranged on the Anglo-Catholic altar (fig. 2).⁴⁷ Although both the upper- and middle-class parlour and the dining room were used as places to impress and receive visitors, the former was conceived of as a feminine space and the

latter as masculine. Dining room furniture was expected to be solid and the table was presided over by the paterfamilias. The Tractarian emphasis on the Eucharist transformed churches, again in functional terms, into dining rooms presided over by the priest. The elaboration of flowers on the altar neatly matched the arrangement provided at home for *service à la russe*. Moreover, the arrangement of flowers on the dining table was specifically the wife's responsibility (servants not being trusted to have the requisite aesthetic sensibility), just as the wives of the parish took the lead in garnishing the altar (our Lord's table) with flowers.⁴⁸ The Tractarian and Anglo-Catholic nave and chancel, with their mingling of public and private, and their female-directed symmetrical decoration carried out under the presiding eye of male authority, can be read as analogues of the contemporary parlour and dining room.

There are other parallels between ecclesiastical and domestic 'garnishing'. Like the church, the home was widely held to be a 'sacred' space at this time.⁴⁹ Moreover, style manuals on correct domestic conduct were proliferating at exactly the same time as their equally exacting counterparts were laying down the minutiae of ecclesiastical ritual.⁵⁰ Andrea Tange, in her comparison between Victorian publications and their twentieth-century equivalents is misleading when she asserts that only the latter 'are explicitly focussed on consumable products, implicitly creating a commodity fetish, rather than emphasizing the moral value of these objects for the culture as Victorian texts did'.⁵¹ Both domestic and ecclesiastical style manuals were implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, linked into the market in the nineteenth century. These style guides have been widely recognised as a constitutive element in the development of the Victorian middle classes, who

established their new (and frequently precarious) status through judicious spending, cultural and religious performance.

Guides to domestic floral decoration took great pains to reassure the reader of the moral probity of such practices. Writers rushed to reassure the morally vigilant that 'the pure and lasting taste for beautiful plants and flowers, if firmly implanted in the youthful mind, almost invariably exerts its beneficial influence for the good'.⁵² Similarly, ecclesiastical guides took pains to establish the appropriateness of such 'feminine' decorations in churches. For example, William Alexander Barrett (1834-91), in his *Flowers and Festivals; or, the Directions for the Floral Decoration of Churches* (1868), who had recently been appointed to the choir of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and had become music critic on the *Morning Post*, asked 'what is more beautiful to behold than the flowers of the earth wreathing and adorning, with graceful foliage, the pillars of a Christian Church; as though pouring out in mute adoration their praises to the King of Kings' (fig. 3).⁵³ Since creepers such as ivy were widely employed in the art and literature of the time to refer symbolically to feminine constancy reliant on masculine support, one could read Barrett's decorative schemes as being designed to be congruent with expected gender roles.⁵⁴ Indeed, he dedicated his book to the 'the wives and daughters of our parochial clergy who like those who were first at the Holy Sepulchre are foremost in every good and useful work'.⁵⁵ Thus, by following these books of rules, the feminine element (both plants and women) could be employed in a manner that was appropriately subordinate to legitimate forms of masculine authority.

The abundant decoration of churches with temporary displays consumed a good deal of time and money. The link between commerce and the sacred is abundantly clear

from Edward Young Cox (c.1840- c.1930), *The Art of Garnishing Churches at Christmas and other Festivals* (1st ed., 1868). This was, in essence, a catalogue of 'Cox and Son, Ecclesiastical Warehouse'.⁵⁶ A recent newspaper article about this book described it as 'an energetic combination of cheerfulness, vulgarity, commercialism and piety... Every surface of your already carved and polychromatic church (for this was the high age of ritual ornament) could be covered, hung, festooned and circled with foliage, crockets, shiny stars, symbolic letters, illuminated crosses, bannerets, devices and brightly coloured texts'.⁵⁷ Construction of the kinds of vegetal cladding on otherwise plain walls, pillars and arches as advocated by Cutts (fig. 3) was facilitated by detailed construction diagrams, such as one example which more or less obeys Puginian principles of surface decoration before taking off into a flying festoon across an arch (fig. 4). The 'wholesale consecration of the marketplace' which Leigh Eric Schmidt has established as one of the key aspects of the modern co-existence of religion and capitalism owed a good deal, in Britain, to the material enthusiasms of the Anglo-Catholics.⁵⁸

The Helpfulness of Effeminacy

There is one other important cultural transformation which helped to legitimate the use of flowers in Anglican churches and that was a small but significant shift in the gendering of clergy, for mid-Victorian England also saw the gradual decline of anti-clerical images (that had been popular since the Reformation) of economically and sexually rapacious clergy. We can examine this process at work by looking at a cartoon: "'Pig-Headed" Ritualism' (1869)

which is a satire on a rural harvest festival (fig. 5a). Such services, in which interiors were decked with grain, fruit and other evidences of divine abundance, were a recent innovation in the Church of England. Robert Hawker (1803-75) is widely credited with holding the first such service in 1843 in Morwenstow in Cornwall and the service was officially recognised by the Church of England in 1862.⁵⁹ Word got around that at Haydock, Lancashire in September 1868, a pig's head had been placed on the altar, a scandalous allegation that was apparently so titillating that it was even reported in *The New York Times*.⁶⁰ *Punch* chipped in merrily that 'the ritualists [ie. Anglo-Catholics] are to have special Harvest services, and a new edition of the *Directorium Anglicanum* will probably contain a special chapter on Harvests and Har-vestments'.⁶¹ Frederick George Lee, editor of the 2nd and 3rd editions of that publication, wrote immediately to *The Times* to deny that the manual sanctioned such practices, but he failed to stop the scandal mounting.⁶²

...Piety is shocked and Satire falters

At the sad sight of these desecrated altars –

While eagerly the officiating priest

Receives fresh gifts to glorify the feast,

From pretty girls in velvet, dainty flowers,

Such as bloom best in these September hours –

While HODGE the labourer, born to plough and dig,

Presents the huge head of his favourite PIG!⁶³

These verses that accompanied the cartoon rely upon hoary stereotypes of greedy priests who have reinvented Holy Communion as a banquet for their personal pleasure, whilst feeble-minded rustics, women and children look on in awe (fig. 5b). The underlying anxiety in such imaginings is related to idea of the consumption by the priests not just of the pig's head, but also of the girls, those 'dainty flowers' abloom in the autumn. However, the fantasy of Anglo-Catholicism as a perverse trap for unwary women was on the wane. By the time of the Haydock scandal an interesting distinction was emerging between Roman and Anglo-Catholic priests. In the same volume as "Pig-Headed Ritualism" we find another cartoon, 'Next-Door Neighbours', which compares the Roman and Anglo-Catholic methods of confession and penance. The introduction of such practices by Anglo-Catholics had been greeted with enormous concern that it was a front for the sexual abuse of women.⁶⁴ But, by 1869, this satirical and staunchly Protestant volume was depicting only Roman Catholic priests as rigorous and scary whilst the Anglo-Catholics were seen as a gossipy, flirtatious, and a fit subject for ridicule but not for fear.⁶⁵

What underlay this change was increasingly familiarity with the banal realities of everyday ritualistic practice, but it also owed something to a gradual reconfiguring of popular understandings of the Anglo-Catholic priest. Just above the head of a monocled dandy there are two campily posed figures in the stained-glass windows of the church in 'Pig-Headed Ritualism' (fig. 5c),. The hint of clerical effeminacy, and its linkage with flowers is confirmed in the accompanying verse which denounces the officiating clergy thus:

... by your exhibitions, you express

A plusquam feminine delight in dress,

And to the altar in procession go

And make the church a horticultural show.

A series of studies has explored the relationship between Victorian Anglo-Catholicism and the development of the imagery of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ In the period under consideration in this article, this process had yet to progress sufficiently to create a new form of sexual paranoia over same-sex desire, but no longer were these men widely thought of as the rampant predators that had stalked earlier Protestant fantasies. The effeminisation of the Anglo-Catholic priest had gone just far enough that it was starting to rendered him unthreatening to the chastity of the women in the congregation because his main concerns appeared to be his belly, his frocks and his flowers.

Conclusions

From the start of Victoria's reign, placement of flowers in Church was advocated by priests who advocated the spiritual significance of such displays. These activities were regulated, and so given cultural legitimacy, by the means of style manuals which positioned floral decoration as the appropriate feminine compliment to the manliness of architectural structure. Such practices were, in due course, given sanction by the formal redrawing of Church law. In 1880 it was reported that 'as early as 4am well-known Churchmen and delicate ladies were standing outside the entrance [of Covent Garden flower market in central London] anxious to have the first bid; for so great a profit do the growers as well as

the shopkeepers make of the decoration of churches that of late years they have refused to book orders in advance'.⁶⁷ By the end of the century, therefore, the use of blooms in church had become so accepted that sermons were preached on the improving moral lessons to be derived from flowers, and 'flower missions' distributed blooms as spiritual pick-me-ups to the poor and bedridden.⁶⁸ During the period from Queen Victoria's accession to her death flowers in church had gone from being dangerous objects emblematic of the taints of the world that were only to be employed under carefully controlled circumstances, to spiritually efficacious evidences of the Lord's purifying Grace which just required employment in good taste.

The foremost late Victorian authority on flowers in church was Ernest Geldart (1848-1929), rector of Little Braxted in Essex. Geldart had trained for a decade as a designer and architect in the office of Alfred Waterhouse before he took Holy Orders in 1873. From 1881 his 'more or less formal arrangement' with Cox, Son, Buckley & Co, the aforementioned ecclesiastical suppliers, paid him more than he obtained from his parish living (population 117 in 1881).⁶⁹ What is notable is that Geldart lays down, not so much guidelines for decency, as strictures against examples of excess such as 'a plantation of flower pots, which entirely prevents the clergyman from approaching within a foot or two of the basin [i.e. font].' He provides some rather amusing examples of flimsy structures which led to objects falling from the ceiling onto the congregation, and of a superfluity of decoration used to decorate ornaments ('to cover up costly carving or marble inlay with bunches of leaves is ridiculous', etc). In his final publication on this subject, *A Manual of Church Decoration and Symbolism* (1899) there is a section cautioning against the construction of 'impossible features', such as ivy tracery on hoops in front of a stained-glass window. He also worries

about the use of the cross, 'the most sacred, yet, at the same time, the most vulgar of ornaments. Far too often it is used simply as a *dernier ressort* when invention fails. "Oh, put a cross," is an easy solution of a difficulty; but it is not reverent nor is it edifying, to see the symbol of the redemption scattered broadcast'.⁷⁰

Fussing campily among his floral arrangements and worrying about how to avoid the *dernier ressort* of superfluous crosses in ivy-work, he, his colleagues and their churches were well on the way to becoming the eccentric and colourful ornaments so essential to later visions of England in all its eccentric decadence. The story of this ongoing development of cultural politics provides a rich opportunity for further exploration. Such research would involve exploring the connections and disconnections between the material politics of the later nineteenth century Anglo-Catholics and those of the aesthetes and adherents of the Arts and Crafts Movement who increasingly 'divorced the search for beauty from the incarnationalist religious quest'.⁷¹ David Shuttleton, in his exploration of 'gay pastoral' has commented on the way in which 'the orchidaceous image of the sissified, citified queer as a hybrid hot-house flower persists as a popular stereotype'. Through such work we could develop our understanding of the role of 'hot-house flowers', and their human counterparts, in the reconfigurations and interactions of worship and sexuality at the *fin de siècle* and beyond.⁷²

Fig. 1. Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts* (1851), WA 1894.10, reproduced with permission of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Fig. 2. John Purchas, *Directorium Anglicanum* (1858), plate 1.

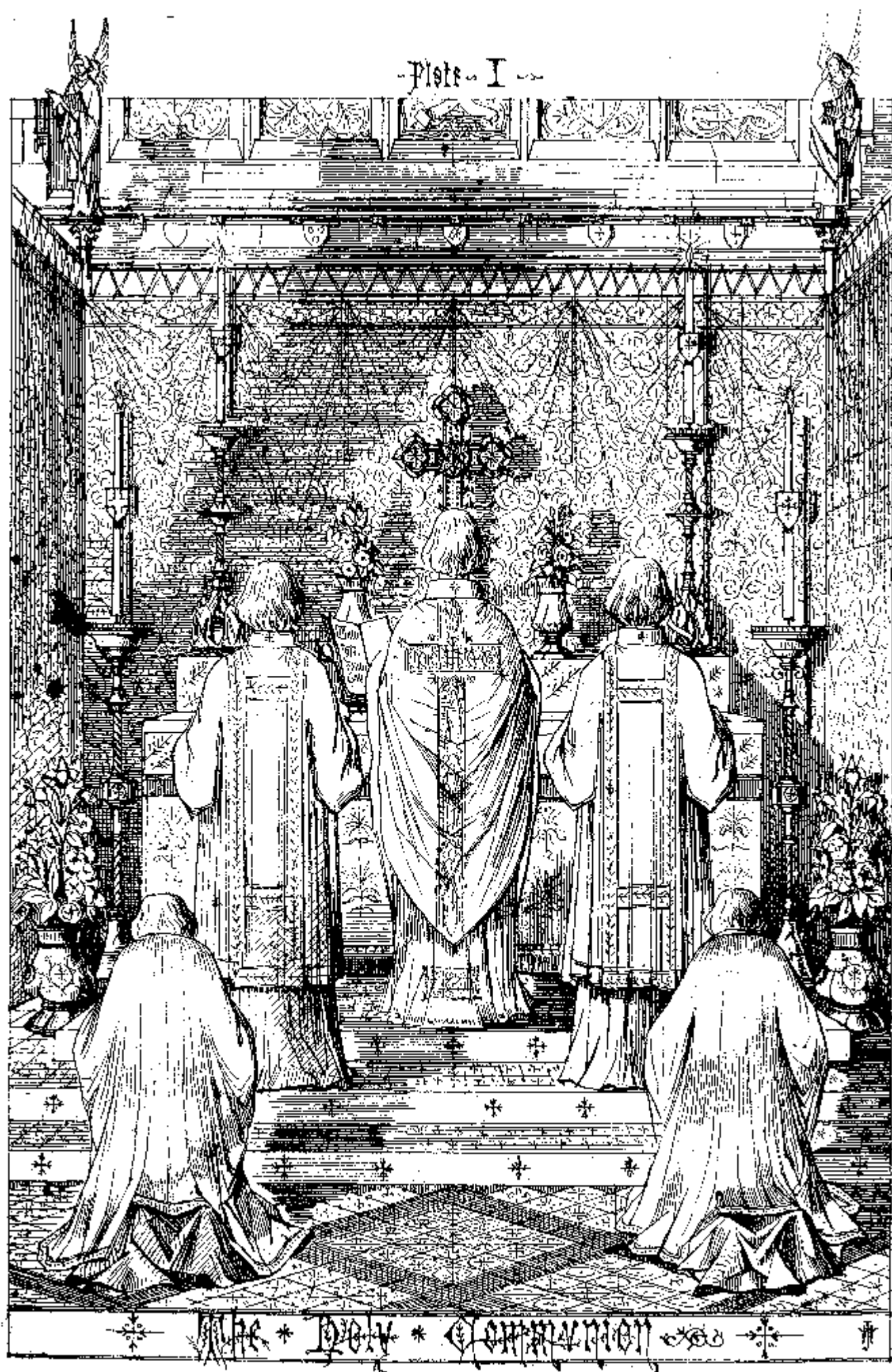


Fig. 3. Edward Lewes Cutts, *An Essay on the Christmas Decoration of Churches* (1859), frontispiece.

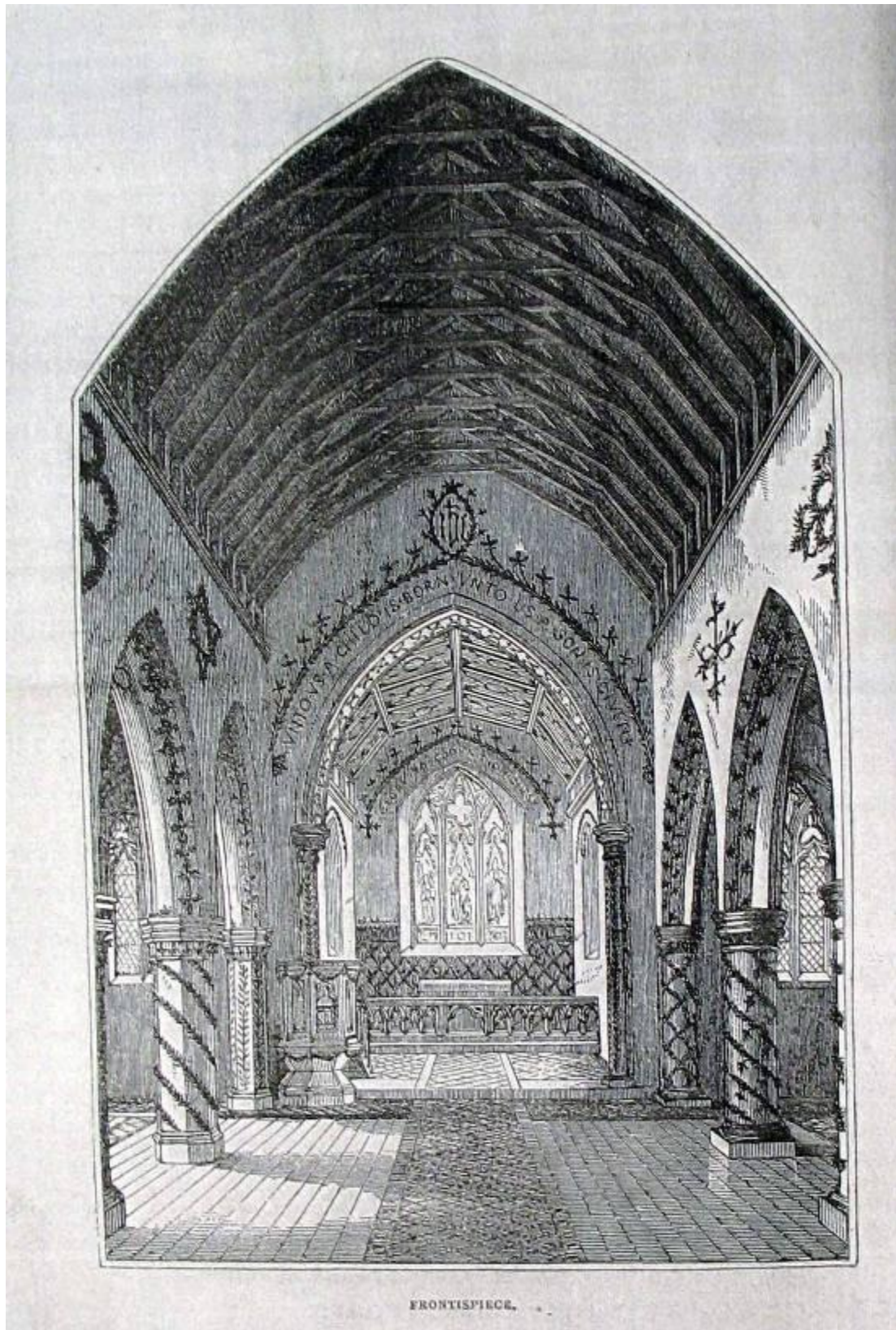


Fig. 4. Edward Young Cox, *The Art of Garnishing Churches*, 2nd ed. (1869), plate 3, after p. 66.

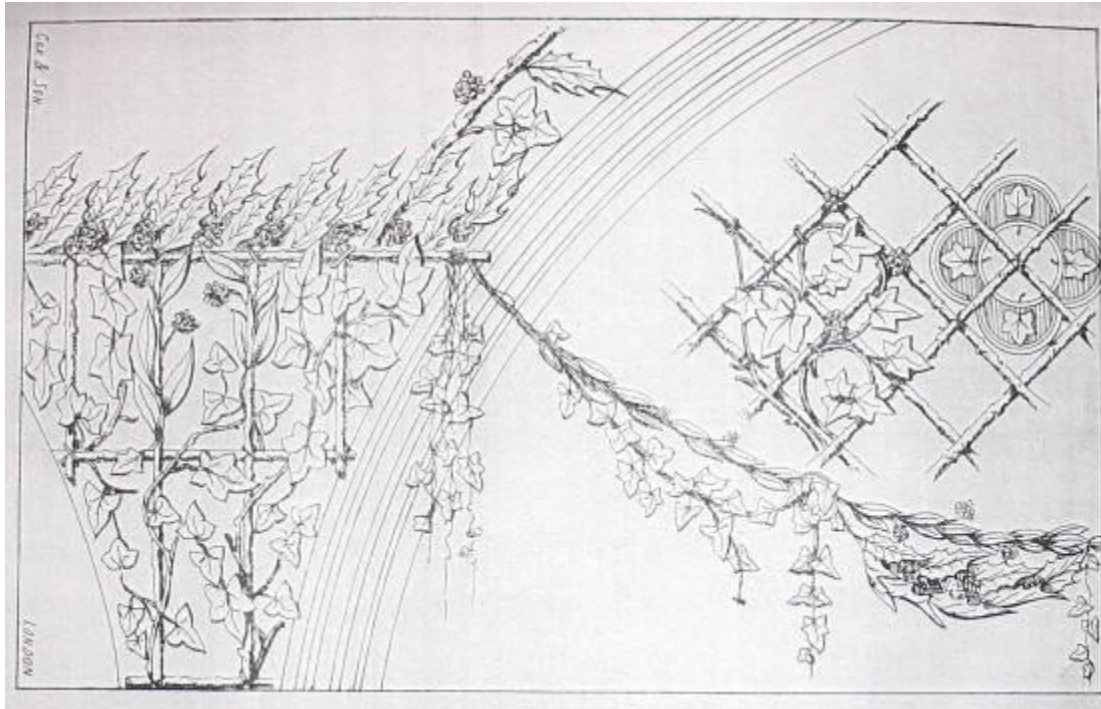


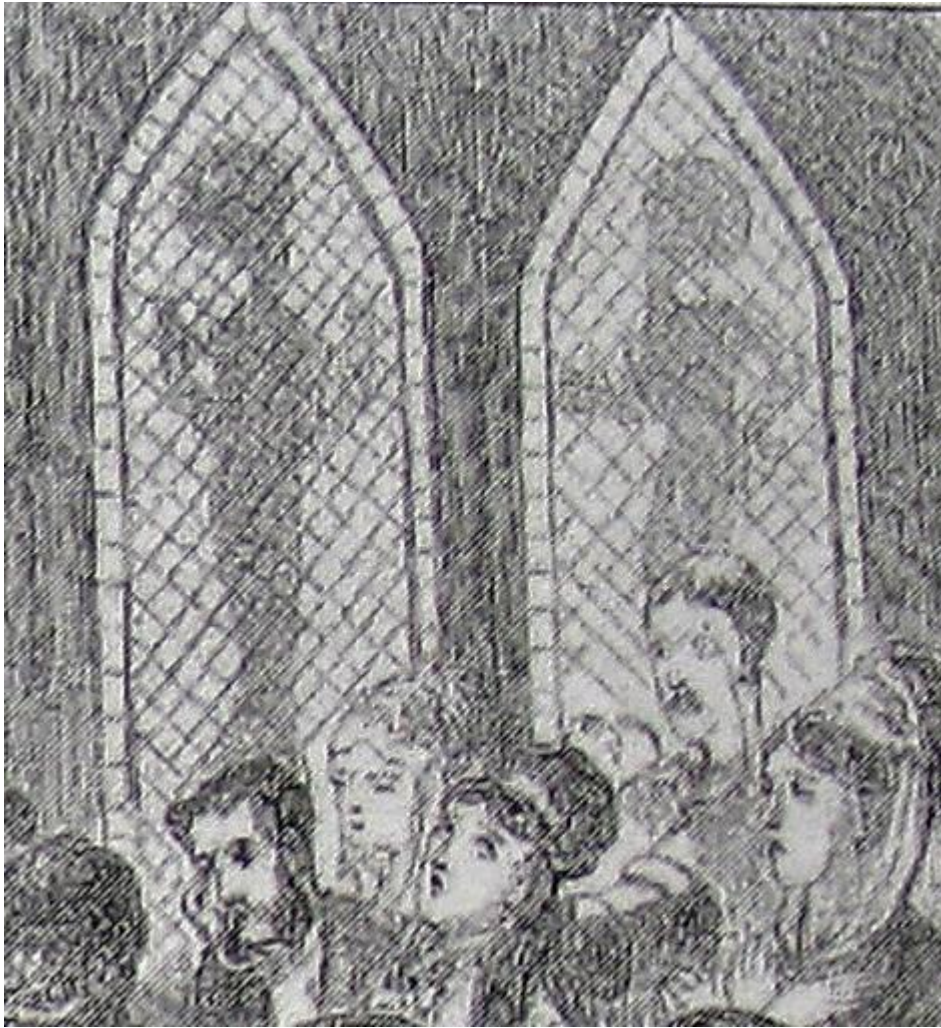
Fig. 5a. "'Pig-Headed' Ritualism', Anon, *The Echoes* (1869), plate E, copyright British Library Board, all rights reserved, 1754.a.48.



5b. detail.



5c. detail.



¹ I would like to thank Dr. Brent Elliott and Prof. Robin Veder for their help in the course of this research

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⁷ Goody (1993), 301.

⁸ Nicolette Scourse, *The Victorians and their Flowers* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 63-5.

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¹¹ Frederick Oakeley, *The Catholic Florist: A Guide to the Cultivation of Flowers for the Altar* (London: Richardson, 1851). The quotations I give are from Oakeley's preface, but the body of the work was compiled with the help of his nineteenth-year-old convert and assistant, William Weale, who remains unaccredited, probably because he was sentenced to three months imprisonment for grievous bodily harm around the time of publication, Anon., 'A Protestant Layman', *A Letter to the Members of the Metropolitan Catholic Institute* (London: Joseph Ambridge, 1854), 2-3.

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